

On fashion and identity at Design Indaba 2015

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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The 2015 Design Indaba provided fertile ground for even the most ardent fashionistas and Afrophiles. In this context both topics took on a new importance, raising issues around self, image, ego, identity, making, economies and African-ness - weaving a joyous celebration of African culture and style through the three-day Indaba programme.

Selly Rabe Kane: Alien Cartoons

The first taste of an African fashion aesthetic at Indaba arrived early on Day 2 via designer Selly Rabe Kane - wearing a salmon pink fringed kimono-style jacket, appliqued with rocket-like motifs over skinny jeans and a sculptured up-do hairstyle, Kane shared her story as a graduate of business administration from Paris, who felt called to switch to fashion design, return to her native Senegal, a city she describes as "electric", to produce her fantasy fashion collections, such as [Inner Cruise](#) and [Alien Cartoon](#). Offset by high-end video production, multi-media collaborations and inner city art happenings, her work has been featured in Italian *Vogue* and exhibited at the MOMA PS1 gallery in New York.

Diop not Dior

If there was such as thing "Man of the Indaba", Omar Victor Diop, ([@omarvictordiop](#)), would probably have taken it. Peppering his presentation with hashtags such as #throwback [it was a Thursday] and #havefun, showing images which contextualised his upbringing - including academic references to books by anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop (not sure if related), the innate style of family members captured in 1950's Senegalese photographic studio portraits and a mood board of 1970's cultural inspirations such as Grace Jones, 70's disco and Michael Jackson. Bonus tip: Diop recommends [Touki Bouki](#) - the first (and as far as we know only African road movie) as the best movie in the world.



The above influences all come together in Diop's own photography - a cultural mélange of portraiture, fashion and art collaborations such as the Studio of Vanities series, which reveals a vibrant, urban African style in the best Dakaresque traditions. Leaving an indelible imprint on Indaba audiences is Project Diaspora, undertaken during a four month residency in Málaga, Spain, in which Diop recreates himself as the model to replicate found portraits of notable Africans in the styles of the 15th-19th centuries, but anchors the images in the present by means of iconic football references. He shares that he intends to expand this voyage of discovery towards retracing notable Africans, around the Pacific Rim and the Middle East, in an ironic reverse colonialism and quest to reclaim identity.

Feast your eyes and inhale Afrocentric pride at [Omar Victor Diop](#).

A fashion fairy tale

Once upon a time, a 16-year old heiress to a textile mill called Rosita, met, fell in love and married a handsome Olympic hurdler named Ottavio Missoni who had a knitting workshop manufacturing track and field clothing. Together they moved into an idyllic villa in the country and launched a small knitwear atelier called Missoni where Ottavio created the fabrics and Rosita the fashionable clothing, which featured distinctive zigzag motifs, stripes and waves that no one had ever seen before. By the 1960s, everyone in the region had fallen under the spell of the Missoni patterns and style and even a fairy godmother, from across the seas, Editor-in-chief of US *Vogue*, Diana Vreeland, had waved her magic wand over the brand and the clothing was soon desired throughout the globe.

For 40 years Rosita reigned over her global knitwear kingdom and then starting feeling tired of the relentless pace of fashion she handed over that side of her business to her talented children and grandchildren during the 1990's, while remaining the Creative Director of Missoni Home fabrics and furnishings, which she still loves with all her heart. And Rosita and her granddaughter came to South Africa to present the story of her brand and her life and received a standing ovation to celebrate her incredible design achievements and to invoke the wish that they would all continue to live happily ever after.

Ng'endo Mukii: "I wanted to be an African"

Royal College of Art (RCA) and Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) graduate, Ng'endo Mukii ([@NgendoMukii](#)) introduced her presentation by showing those sorts of idyllic tribal images that feature on the covers of coffee table books such as *The Last African* by Gert Chesi and *Before they pass Away* by Jimmy Nelson, that she had known as a child from her father's library, as well as images of Eden-like and epic African sunsets, all of which have since become some sort of universal symbols of an African dream. Mukii shares statements from her childhood both poignant and profound such as "I wanted to be in that sunset with a spear in my hand, I wanted to be an African", posing questions like, "Why was I born in an Africa with running water and education?" Which pretty much nails the elusiveness of what it feels like to be African - forever seeking among the tainted and unattainable the innocence and bliss of the idyll which yields only reality.



The films, *Yellow Fever* and others are technically challenging, animated, scratched, collaged, bleached and worked over to communicate the relationship black women have to their appearance, with children as young as her six year old niece admitting that when looking in the mirror their appearance makes them feel uncomfortable in relation to the images they see on TV, and as commentary on the scourge of ads for skin lightening products and hair straighteners aimed at black women as ideals of beauty. Scratched and obscured film clips of dancers seemingly trying to climb out of their own skins, fuse the genre, the technique and this subject matter about self image and confirm the worthiness of multiple awards for animation and short films that Mukii has garnered for her work. See them [here](#).

Sindiso Khumalo: Love letters between self and ancestry

Up there with 2015 Design Indaba favourites, as much for the quality and approach to her work as for its ethos sentiments and just plain timeliness Sindiso Khumalo ([@sindisokhumalo](#)) is one of the first designers to really enter the textile space with authentic African motifs, playing with scale found in traditional beaded Zulu love letters sourced from her Nguni culture, to produce cutting edge engineered prints on contemporary shaped garments such as narrow pants and shift style tops and dresses, ironically describing one of the prints as Art Deco - I wanted to point out to her, "Darling, Art Deco was inspired by African motifs in the first place". Anyhow, Khumalo adds to the integrity of her products by collaborating with rural

beaders, knitters, weavers and embroiderers and was thrilled to be able to take an article in which the *British Financial Times* featured the crafters, back to show them how their work is valued in the world.



The live catwalk showing of her latest white on white collection, featuring the same types of geometric motifs, was super contemporary with enough ethnic pattern and flavour to be bang on global fashion trends and making us all very proud.

Emily Oberman - Ebola logo

I have just realised that "My Ebola Miner" is an anagram of Emily Oberman's name, which is appropriate as, although she is a quintessentially New York graphic designer who has worked for 20 years on the titles of the *Saturday Night Live* show, she did present one case study in which she had been asked to design a logo for the UN Ebola Response taskforce to wear.

The best design solution was found via an existing Ghanaian Adinkra symbol meaning *BOA ME NA ME MMOA WO*, which translates as "Help me and let me help you" and coincidentally looking a lot like Sindiso's textile motifs shown a few sessions earlier.

Designers such as Mukii, Diop, Rabe and Khumalo are encapsulating a new African motif, mythology, and culture, harbingers of a resurgence of African identity, pride and style. It will be fascinating to watch how these trends intersect and push the boundaries of the Western ideals of fashion and couture, which have been the benchmark of chic for centuries.

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